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SUBJECT: DEMONSTRATORS CALL ON LEADERS TO RESIGN

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The May 3 Tel Aviv demonstration gathered more than 100,000 people, but its diverse assortment of students, reservists and settlers will not compel political action such as early elections. Some analysts speculated, however, that the demonstration may strengthen the hand of those in the Labor Party who are calling for Labor to leave the coalition even before the Labor leadership primaries. The demonstration calling for the Prime Minister and Defense Minister "to go home" that took place in Rabin Square will not force Olmert's government to resign in the short-run, but there remains a deep bitterness in the Israeli body politic towards its current political leadership that is unlikely to dissipate quickly. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Uzi Dayan, leader of the "Tafnit" party that failed to pass the two-percent threshold in the 2006 elections, led off the May 3 speeches by "non-politicians." Reserve soldiers, families of missing and dead soldiers, a Movement for Quality in Government spokesman, and civil society representatives from Sderot all quoted from the harsh language of the Winograd Committee's critique of the government's handling of the Second Lebanon War, calling it an indictment of the Olmert/Peretz government. A variety of opposition parties from across the political spectrum -- Meretz, Likud and the National Union/National Religious Party -- reportedly encouraged their followers to participate in the demonstration.

¶3. (U) The demonstration included loud refrains of "Go home (Olmert/Peretz)," but many of the people in the crowd were in a somber, reflective mood rather than a rabble-rousing mode. Some called for elections; others warned of the danger of elections bringing Opposition leader "Bibi" Netanyahu to power. When red-shirted students joined the demonstration later in the evening, they combined their critique of Olmert's failure in the Lebanon War with his refusal to meet student demands for tuition reductions.

¶4. (U) Bumper stickers distributed at the rally called for President Katsav's castration (as punishment for his rape charges), and death to the Finance Minister (for allegedly stealing from Holocaust survivors). Followers of Moshe Feiglin, a far right-wing activist and founder of the "this is our land" extremist movement, attempted to raise a banner proclaiming Feiglin to be the leader Israelis are seeking, but others in the crowd forced them to wrap up their banners. In general, the crowd was mostly young, with a good many (albeit no majority) religious Zionists from settler communities sprinkled throughout. The respected journalist Nahum Barnea commented in Yediot Aharonot this morning that the crowd appeared to represent mostly the veteran Ashkenazi sector of Israeli society, with few Russian immigrants or Sephardim from development towns visible, but also an unusual mix of secular Tel Avivans and religious Zionists. A policeman at the rally estimated the crowd at 120,000.

Labor Rebels May Test Coalition

15. (SBU) Labor MK Ofir Pines Paz, who resigned from Olmert's government last October when it welcomed the right-wing Yisrael Beiteinu into the coalition, has announced his intention to camp out in a tent in front of Olmert's office until Olmert resigns. He will join an IDF veteran, Motti Ashkenazi, who led the post-Yom Kippur War demonstration in 1973 against then-PM Golda Meir and her defense minister, Moshe Dayan. Pines Paz currently trails MK Ami Ayalon and former PM Ehud Barak in the Labor Party leadership race that will culminate in May 28 primary elections, but may have jumped ahead of current Labor Party Chairman and Defense Minister, Amir Peretz, according to press reports.

Political Calendar: No Confidence Votes on May 7

16. (SBU) To date, only Labor Secretary-General Eitan Cabel has resigned from the government, but a cohort of as many as 10 Labor MK's may not join in the coalition effort on May 7 to defeat four no confidence motions on the docket. Even so, Olmert's 78-member coalition (out of 120) should be able to survive that challenge comfortably. Cabel has announced that he will convene the party's central committee on May 13 to vote on quitting the government.

JONES